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Truthful Dialogue

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ABSTRACT

We explore truthful dialogue as a means of developing cultural competence, in particular the skill of managing the dynamics of difference. We discuss specific incidents in a year-long conflict which occurred in a teacher-education cohort between an African-American Christian woman and a White Jewish lesbian. In truthful dialogue, the participants are encouraged to examine themselves--their feelings and their experiences—and to speak together in the pursuit of mutual understanding. The facilitator(s) assist them in communicating in a way that feels safe for all involved, so that they use the experience as a way to increase their personal cultural competence. Finally, if appropriate, the facilitators assist in planning for some kind of action, such as our final, whole-group, facilitated session with the cohort.

Bernice and Miriam were two women in a teacher education cohort who hurt one another over and over for nearly a year until they learned how to hear beyond the words that cut and bruised. They moved from conflict to collaboration by engaging in truthful dialogue, a practice that helps us move toward cultural competence. At various times throughout the process, the two women made such statements as: "I apologize for causing you hurt." "I didn't know." "Was I wrong? If I am, what's a better way to go about it?"

The concept of cultural competence is not new; much of the pioneering work in this area came about in the arena of mental health and health care. In 1989, Cross et al, mental health professionals working with Georgetown University's Center for Child and Human Development, discussed gaps in the quality of health care between dominant and minority groups. These were found to be based in part on disconnects between Western medical protocols and other cultural beliefs and traditions. Perhaps one of the seminal situations which expressed this gap most clearly was the case described by Fadiman (1997). In this case a Hmong infant's epilepsy was complicated by a failure of the medical community to acknowledge and engage the cultural dynamics at play.

In education, similar disconnects have been identified for decades, as far back as the 1970's (Cazden, Johns, & Hymes, 1970), although the term cultural competence was not used at the time. Helping our emerging teachers develop cultural competence is vital if we are to reduce these disconnects. At our university, as at many others, we begin teaching cultural competence by exploring where our students are and helping

them move along the continuum towards cultural competence. Some of them come from blatantly racist families and are unaware of their own racism, while others have done a great deal of work on their own identities, and are quite skilled as multicultural communicators. Thus, we start with an awareness of where they are on the continuum of cultural competence. Some students are defensive when we bring up these issues. Many have felt—and express--fear, guilt, denial, and/or anger. Thus, as teachers, we must learn to deal with emotions as they emerge.

The term "truthful dialogue" was first used by Sharon Gary-Smith, a social justice activist who defines it as "authentic conversation that portrays the honest and sometimes raw emotion of the moment, that shares the feelings associated with the incident or topic and which seeks to elicit the same from the other conversants, especially in issues around race, racism, ethnicity, gender, other subjects that are hard to engage because they are ripe with history and carry with them the baggage of assumptions, stereotypes and the fear of differences that keep us at bay from one another" (S. Gary, personal communication, July 1, 2007). When using this term, we must recognize—and fully believe--that what is truthful for one person may differ from truth for another person. For "truth" is subjective.

We respectfully and carefully used truthful dialogue to establish a tone for the conversation that we will explore in this paper, and we intend to use it for those conversations we hope will follow. In order to engage in truthful dialogue, participants must be aware of not only the context, but also the possible subtexts--collateral issues informing our understanding of the conversation. Truthful dialogues are like jazz, made up of both melody lines (the understood and shared context) as well as improvisations (the unscripted solos that personalize the musical conversation). We can establish mutual understanding once we acknowledge voices and instruments used in new ways. We can move forward together when we accept a score that can often appear to be incongruous with the accepted "classics." We need faith and trust in order to realize the open and honest communication--the empowering conversation--that must occur if we are to understand the challenges that face us. As teachers, students, neighbors, and individuals, we must be prepared to learn new instruments. We must learn to appreciate different sounds, rhythms, and tonalities. And we must begin to explore the new arrangements that come about as a result. It is not the music or orchestra of the past; the audience has changed and how we "play" to them must shift as well.

At this junction in our history, truthful dialogue stands opposed to pernicious silence. We're coming from a history of tacit agreement to not raise critical issues. For generations we didn't talk about oppression and prejudice, and now false notions of political correctness, combined with the taboo of addressing conflict, prevents us from giving voice to our deepest feelings. If we do not engage in truthful dialogue, we give implicit approval to the silence.

Once we begin to talk honestly, our feelings towards one another shift. For instance, we're not going to be upset with students about what they don't know. But once we've had a conversation and they've raised their awareness, we're going to hold them accountable. And they will do the same for us, to be sure. We must remember to not be too harsh with each other. We must be compassionate about people struggling to have these conversations because most of us haven't learned yet how to have them. It is painful to get outside of our comfort zones, yet that is what is demanded of us when we move away from fear, guilt, and anger, and we move toward cultural competence.

Cultural competence for educators is a developmental process, which can be defined as "the ability to effectively teach cross-culturally" (Diller and Moule, p. 12). It requires that educators continually acquire knowledge and develop skills that enable them to teach in such a manner. The Oregon State Department

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of Education's working definition of cultural competence (2004) calls upon the work of Cross et al (1989), and states that it is "a developmental process occurring at individual and system levels that evolves over an extended time period. Cultural competence requires that individuals and organizations:

a. Have a defined set of values and principals, demonstrated behaviors, attitudes, policies and structures that enable them to work effectively in a cross-cultural manner.

b. Demonstrate the capacity to:

1. Value diversity

2. Engage in self-reflection,

3. Manage the dynamics of difference

4. Acquire and institutionalize cultural knowledge, and

5. Adapt to the diversity and the cultural contests of the communities they serve.

c. Incorporate and advocate the above in all aspects of leadership, policy-making, administration, practice, and service delivery while systematically involving customers, key stakeholders, and communities."

In this article, we will examine the development of the third skill, that of managing the dynamics of difference, which is defined as "knowing what can go wrong in cross-cultural communication and knowing how to set it right" (Diller and Moule, 2005, p. 16).

UNDERSTANDING THE DYNAMICS OF DIFFERENCE WITHIN AN INCLUSIVE LEARNING COMMUNITY

In our experience, educators working with the multi-pronged definition of cultural competence cited above tend to find it easier to work on their own awareness and on the more objective study of specific cultures than to actually learn how to deal with dynamics of difference.

Well-intentioned teachers often find themselves following recipe-like suggestions for working with categories of students, but stumble when faced with real students (and colleagues) having real conversations—or worse, when faced with real students and colleagues failing to have these conversations. Even if conflict makes us squirm in discomfort, as educators we must develop our ability to deal with cross-cultural conflicts. As with any other skill, we need practice in facilitation.

Indeed, much can "go wrong" in communication between people of different races, ethnicities, religions, and sexual orientations, as evidenced in the situation related below. Knowing how to "set it right" requires a complex set of skills, often called "conflict resolution." Educators have a myriad of choices available to them for guidance in conflict resolution, many of which require extensive training to employ successfully. Therefore, many educators feel uncomfortable as facilitators and may avoid conflict situations whenever possible. The successful facilitator in a situation involving cross-cultural conflict must also possess the other skill areas of cultural competency: awareness of differences and self-awareness; knowledge of the cultures of the people involved in the conflict; a deep understanding of issues of institutional racism and other oppressions; the ability to remain non-reactive and compassionate; and the ability to remain "in" the conflict without trying to solve it immediately. Certainly teaching and facilitating conflict are related, but they involve quite different skill sets. And when the conflicts revolve around cultural issues, additional layers of skills are required.

As facilitators, our own emotions are involved—how do we feel about conflict? Do we want it to just go away? Can we function effectively and support others in situations where

emotional pain is involved? Or, do we tend to skim the surface of the issues and feelings, thus depriving participants of the opportunity to learn, even if it is painful? Of course, we do not intend to reproduce a complete training program herein; but perhaps by exploring one cross-cultural conflict situation that occurred in a college classroom—and the subsequent facilitation--we can begin to examine our own feelings and skill levels as facilitators.

How can teachers learn these skills? Inclusive learning communities provide an environment that is conducive to practicing these skills. Inclusive learning communities are what bell hooks (1994) calls "locations of possibility" –places where we work towards education as the practice of freedom, where we weave together the experiences and understanding of all involved. hooks emphasizes the critical importance of dialogue in the learning setting and states that "to engage in dialogue is one of the simplest ways we can begin as teachers, scholars, and critical thinkers to cross boundaries, the barriers that may or may not be erected by race, gender, class, professional standing, and a host of other differences" (p. 130).

When an interpersonal conflict occurs in a group setting, it provides an opportunity for learning for the whole group, not just for the two people engaged in the conflict and the teacher/facilitator. The opportunity for learning extends past the moments of conflict, past the initial "settling of the conflict." It reaches into the future, if the participants are willing to engage with the issues on a deeper level. In this way, conflicts in the classroom are important life lessons. After all, we are teaching students to be responsible citizens who can engage in the public discourse. In order to create communities that are inclusive of all people from all backgrounds and abilities, our citizens must learn to share leadership and power, to participate in decision-making and problem solving. If we long for healthy communities in a sustainable world, our citizens must cooperate with one another for the common good, as well as acknowledge our interdependence with the rest of the ecosystem. As children participate in communities in the context of schooling, they are given the opportunity to evolve as mature citizens, skilled in the intricacies of relational living (Meltzoff, 2001). In the interest of encouraging cultural competence within inclusive learning communities, we share with you the story of a truthful dialogue, from its inception to a large group debriefing many months later.

This article describes the entire healing process. From the start, Dr. M. and Dr. G. recognized the potential richness inherent in these interactions and agreed to document all conversations. Although we preferred using a tape recorder for the purposes of our qualitative research, we discarded this idea as potentially intrusive, and feared that the participants might not be fully forthcoming. Dr. M. took extensive running notes of both words and nonverbal cues during (when possible) and after each incident and then discussed the notes with Dr. G. It should be noted that quotation marks are used in the article to denote conversations; however, since these were not recorded, the wording is not exact. The authors took every effort to maintain accuracy of the words being spoken as well as of the nonverbal messages that were conveyed by the speakers. Although the conflict built over time, and the incidents must be viewed holistically and in context, we have separated individual interactions and labeled them for ease of reference. After the students graduated, Dr. M. and Dr. G. analyzed the notes in order to gain insight into the efficacy of engaging in truthful dialogue.

THE CONFLICT

The conflict began to fester on the first day of the teacher-education program in a course entitled Learning Communities, in which students explore their personal culture, learn about issues of privilege and power, study cross-cultural communication, and work at creating an inclusive learning community. In this course, students also confront their own prejudices and

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assumptions and struggle to form a community of truth with diverse classmates. While readings and videos and teacher-led discussions provided a basis for understanding the issues, dealing with a real-world conflict provided the opportunity for deep, transformative learning for all of us. The conflict brought us the opportunity to learn these lessons firsthand, with people we knew, rather than from a textbook, a newspaper article, a film, or a scenario. It is natural for students to learn more from these lessons if they are themselves involved. In our class, we were ready with films such as The Color of Fear and Last Chance for Eden by Lee Mun Wah (in which diverse people allow us to hear their intimate thoughts and feelings); scenarios (written from experiences in our own lives); and story-sharing exercises (which examine the lived experiences of our students as text). But when a real-life inter-cultural conflict arose, we did not try to smooth it over. We appreciated it for the gift it truly was—an opportunity for us to bring our heads and our hearts to this work. By modeling truthful dialogue for future teachers we increased the chances of them actually understanding it well enough to try to use it in their own classrooms.

Incident #1: Coming Out

The course was co-taught by the authors, Dr. M.—a White, Jewish woman--, and Dr. G.—an African-American, Christian woman. It fell at the beginning of an 18-month long, cohort-based program. During the second meeting, in September, following a discussion about culture, students were asked to create a visual representation of their own cultures, and then to share them in groups of four. Bernice and Miriam were in the same small group for the activity. Miriam, a White woman in her late twenties, shared her illustration, coming out as a lesbian. Bernice, a Black woman nearing forty, shared her strong Christian faith. No negative words were spoken that evening; however, we all found out later that an infection had begun beneath the surface of public discourse, and, like a deep puncture wound, it would not heal quickly.

Incident #2: Opposition to Everything Gay

In November, a guest speaker was invited to Dr. M.'s class to lead a discussion on LGBTQ issues in school settings. She showed the film, It's Elementary (Chasnoff & Cohen, 1999), and shared aspects of her own life with the students. During that class, Bernice spoke firmly and earnestly of her opposition to everything "gay." Miriam felt personally attacked, and felt that many people in the class spoke with hostility about homosexuality; still, the two women did not confront one another.

Incident #3: Talking with Instructor

As the only openly homosexual student in class, Miriam expressed to the instructor that she felt alone and distraught in the face of her peers' negative comments about homosexuality. She was in tears after this class, and considered switching to a different cohort, but decided that she would stay and work through this potentially positive learning experience. The instructor asked Miriam if she wanted some help addressing this with the class, but she declined. "Let me work on it," she answered.

Incident #4: Bernice Speaks to the Class

In early May, while the cohort was in a different course, Bernice presented information on African-American students. At one point, she stated that she felt alone, and that when she looked out at the class, she didn't see any faces like hers.

Incident #5: Attempt at Connection

Miriam felt strongly that she wanted to make a connection with Bernice, so she approached Bernice at a break, ostensibly to ask advice about a situation at her school placement, where she had overheard two young Black girls using "the N-word."

"I didn't know what to do, so I didn't do

anything," she said. "What could I have done different? What would you have done?" Miriam asked Bernice.

Bernice spoke about being Black, and then Miriam spoke about being uncomfortable when walking down the street as an openly gay woman and getting stared at. Then Miriam said, "I think I know a little about how you feel. When I look out at the class I don't see anybody like me, either. If you ever want to know what it's like to be gay, I'd be glad to talk with you." Bernice did not respond, and the conversation ended.

Incident #6: Don't Assume

On the last day of that course, in late May, Bernice brought up the issue of making assumptions. She said to the class, "I had a conversation with a homosexual person who said 'I think I know what it must be like for you to be stared at because I'm homosexual.' Don't assume you know about someone else. Being Black isn't a choice I've made. Black people don't have a problem with people looking at them." Bernice stated that she'd been offended by the comparison and that teachers shouldn't "assume you understand the life of a student in your class."

Incident #7: Miriam is Upset

Although Bernice didn't name Miriam, it was obvious to the class members to whom she referred. Miriam was visibly upset when the class ended, and some students hugged Miriam. No one said anything to Bernice, who left alone. Miriam spent a half hour debriefing with the instructor, who suggested that Miriam read the opening chapters of Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? They discussed how one can never really understand another person's life experience, particularly when it's filled with overt and covert racism. Although Miriam was a member of two minority groups who have experienced prejudice, that didn't mean she could understand what Bernice had experienced in her life. The instructor also suggested that Miriam call Bernice to speak with her privately.

Incident #8: Phone call

The next day, Miriam called Bernice at home and said that she'd made some assumptions. "I wanted to identify with you and connect; I'm sorry I made an assumption that offended you." Then she again offered, "If you ever want to talk with me about being a lesbian, call me."

The conflict had been worked on, but was not yet resolved. Dr. G. and Dr. M. conferred at this point and decided that a facilitated conversation might help matters. They laid out a plan for a truthful dialogue. Dr. M. contacted Miriam, and explained the process to her, while Dr. G. contacted Bernice and did the same. Both women committed to a two-hour meeting to be held in mid-June at the university, with Dr. G. and Dr. M. serving as facilitators for the truthful dialogue.

THE TRUTHFUL DIALOGUE

Once everyone was seated around the table, Dr. G. thanked the two women for coming. "I ask you to commit your head and your heart," she said. "Part of our obligation as teachers is that you have to engage the difficult conversations." She asked them to write three to five words about how they were feeling after the earlier conversation [Incident #2: Opposition to Everything Gay]. While Miriam quickly put pen to paper, Bernice sat quietly for at least a minute, seeming to labor over her choice of words.

"This is not meant to change minds," Dr. G. said. "It is to help each see through different eyes. No matter how you see it, you have to acknowledge that there's a different point of view. Kids, too, will bring multiple perspectives to situations. The purpose here is to hear and feel the impact of the words on the other person. Remember, you don't have to agree."

We heard words such as nervous, curious,

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hopeful and proud.

Next, Bernice explained how she had felt earlier in the year [Incident #5: Attempt at Connection].

She spoke firmly, "I should have said something then. I realize people say things that don't mean to hurt. I know Miriam has a good heart. But I have a greater duty to Black children. I need to speak up for Black children. If those things hurt me, how much do they hurt a child? I felt that people jumped on me in class. What Miriam said was offensive and I felt everyone needed to know that was offensive. If you make assumptions based on who you are, you're probably going to be wrong." She turned to Miriam, "But I apologize for causing you hurt."

"We may not intend to hurt sometimes, but it still hurts. For instance, an accidental death is a death nonetheless," said Dr. G. to Miriam. By saying this, Dr. G. acknowledged the hurt that Bernice felt. And then, she said to Bernice, "I know how you feel. I live it everyday." Dr. G. was able to support Bernice by letting her know that Bernice's feelings were familiar to her as an African-American woman.

At this point Miriam and Bernice agreed on the context, but were not aware of the subtexts. Our responsibility as facilitators is to bring these collateral issues to light.

What subtexts informed this dialogue even though they were not apparent to the women engaged in the conflict? Are oppressions transferable? Is the pain of discrimination based on sexual identity as serious as the pain of racism? Can we draw similarities between the experience of a homosexual in a predominantly heterosexual society and the experience of an African-American in a predominantly White society? Should we? When others drew comparisons between skin color and sexual orientation, Bernice felt that her experience as a Black woman in a predominantly White city was being minimized. How do issues of power and privilege--the unscripted subtext often present in cross-cultural conversations--play into this?

Dr. G. explained, "This is about power. It plays out in racism. This is about asking people who have power to step up, not just asking Black people to tell us how it feels and then saying, "'Gee, I'm sorry it feels that way for you.'"

"I know I have White privilege," Miriam said. "As a gay person, I can hide and be in a straight world, but that would be living a lie." Here, she acknowledges the key difference between being Black and being a White homosexual. Although she had tried to create an affinity by drawing similarities [Incident #5: Attempt at Connection], she also was aware of the differences created by her skin color privilege, which Bernice could not experience living in the USA. Bernice's body provides the context for her daily interactions, so her difference is constantly affirmed, whether she wants this or not. Presumably, Miriam's difference in terms of sexual orientation often went unnoticed because it is not an immutable characteristic as is skin color. She wanted her difference to be acknowledged.

In fact, Miriam exercised her White privilege in Incident #5, when she sought Bernice's advice. Although we did not discuss this in our truthful dialogue, it is an important subtext that, in retrospect, we would have pursued. Miriam had the privilege of being able to go to a Black person and share a troublesome incident about a racially-charged word and expect the Black person to fix this for her, to provide her with an answer, to tell her what to do. She had wanted to respond to the incident on the playground in a culturally appropriate manner, but she was using privilege when she stated, "I didn't know what to do, so I didn't do anything." Miriam's sense of entitlement allowed her to not feel responsible for doing the hard work of research and inquiry herself. She brought no information or understanding to her conversation with Bernice. This is a subtle, but powerful use of White privilege. It's understandable to feel insecure or inadequate about racially-charged

topics and to ask for advice, but privilege is exercised when the Black person is considered the "expert." Miriam's failure was not in the asking; rather, it was putting the full burden of the solution on Bernice.

Then, the women were asked, "Knowing what you know now, what would you do differently?"

Miriam felt that she would have brought up feelings about homophobia separately from the issue of the girls on the playground. She had wanted to initiate a starter conversation, but she used the incident about the two girls and her response to engage Bernice in dialogue. Since her particular interest was Bernice's sensibilities about homosexuality, this attempt at connection was really—partially--a subterfuge so they could start engaging in difficult conversations. From the new perspective gained in our facilitated conversation, Miriam explained, "It's difficult to hear those things [about being a Black woman] because she's so homophobic," she said. "Was I wrong? If I am, what's a better way to go about it?"

Miriam's intent was to make a connection, yet the impact was that Bernice was insulted. As Aida Hurtado (1999) explains, sometimes White people err by "assuming they are like people of color because they share significant characteristics...this is a false assumption in a racialized society...." (p. 226).

Dr. G. explained, "We know what we know from our own experiences. So, we don't know until we ask. We have to find the courage to say, 'I want to ask you something and I don't want to be offensive.'" To be sure, it is natural for a person who is trying to connect to look for a common frame of reference. In this case, Miriam attempted to establish the commonality of not fitting in, but the comparison she drew between being Black and being gay was offensive to Bernice. So, Bernice had to ask herself,

"How do I maintain dignity?"

Dr. G. encouraged the women to "...be more honest in your discussions." She explained that it actually is skillful to ask questions or to say, "I'm not sure how to say this." It's better to admit that than to unintentionally make wounds that don't heal, that fester and fester until they erupt in anger. The honest, open talking with one another is like putting peroxide on a cut; it can hurt as much as, or more than, the original wound. Yet through truthful dialogue, we can clean that wound and harness the power of healing.

"What was your intention?" Dr. G. asked Bernice.

Bernice answered, "For them [people in the class] to see how it feels for a Black child. To see the treatment I got. I need to speak out every chance I get."

Then Dr. M. asked Miriam, "How did you feel when Bernice spoke about this in front of the class?" [Incident 7: Miriam is Upset]

Miriam explained that after Bernice spoke out in class, she felt humiliated, hurt, alone, and that her hands were tied. Something she'd shared in private with Bernice was told to the rest of the class. "I felt confused," Miriam said. "I heard what she said about assumptions. I felt like I was unable to defend myself about assumptions without minimizing her and her feelings. I felt alone, too. I am the only gay person in the class. I represent a demographic and, like Bernice, I also feel strongly about educating people."

"If you could go back, what would you have preferred Bernice to say to make her point?"

Miriam acknowledged, "Maybe it needed to be that harsh for me to get it."

Bernice felt that she might do some things differently. "I apologize for the hurt," she said again, her soft voice emphasizing her sincerity. "I thought I was the oddest ball in the class."

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Bernice noted that after her comments in class, when Miriam was visibly upset, everyone rushed to take care of Miriam—"Nobody ever came to me to see how I felt. I can't be part of the group unless I become mainstreamed and give up who I am." We could all see how passionately Bernice felt about this. When we speak passionately, it often signals hurt underneath. She felt everyone was concerned about Miriam, and her point was missed. We make presumptions about who's hurt. Who looks tender? Who needs help? Who looks powerful? Who can take it and who can't? How does this play into stereotypes?

Next, Dr. M. brought up the difference between intent and impact. In this case, Miriam's intentions were good but the impact was hurtful, and ended up creating a misunderstanding that raised more issues. Indeed, there were powerful messages to be heard from both of the women. As people fighting for respect and equity, they both wanted to be circumspect and passionate at the same time.

Bernice said, "I assumed the students in the class accepted Miriam. I didn't think that was an issue." Bernice's intent was to tell people about the danger of making assumptions about people. Because she was unaware of the subtexts of homosexuality, she didn't realize the range of feelings on this topic present in the room. So, the impact for Miriam was the opposite of what was intended--instead of Bernice bringing clarity to the situation, her words created more pain and discomfort for Miriam, and ignited some quiet anger as well.
"No, I'm not accepted," Miriam said. "I don't feel accepted by you. You can stand up and say what it's like to be a Black woman. I can't stand up and tell them what it's like to be a gay woman."

"So you're gay--that's your choice. I won't treat you differently because of that," Bernice said.

"I think you're making assumptions," Miriam said.

"I see why you're passionate about being gay. That's your life. I'll pray for you." Bernice meant this sincerely, and her intent at that point was certainly to be kind. Yet, her intended Christian concern had a negative impact on Miriam. Miriam and Dr. M. made direct eye contact.

"I don't need your prayers," Miriam answered, her anger now smoldering.

In this context, what did that powerful phrase mean, I'll pray for you mean? Does it mean that Bernice will pray that Miriam will change? Does it mean that Miriam needs help and that Bernice will pray she gets that help? And to take it one level deeper—what does it mean for a Christian to pray for a Jew? Does it mean that the Christian hopes that the Jew comes to accept Jesus? Thus, even what appears to be a simple act of kindness can be perceived as an insult.

This is a perfect example of why we have to examine both intent and impact. We started out the session by asking what the impact had been on the two women and a common feeling was "hurt." The intentions, however, had not been to hurt, but to teach or to connect.

We brought the conversation back to pain and privilege and the danger of comparisons. Dr. G. said, "I can share what it means to feel different. I'm familiar with that feeling as a Black woman. I can appreciate what Bernice said about feeling quite alone when speaking out in class as the only Black woman in the group. There are some similarities that Bernice and I have felt about comfort level in groups where we are the only person of color in the room."

However, we needed to look also at Miriam's issues of comfort. Although Miriam had skin color privilege, she's had the experience of putting herself in harm's way by self-identifying as a lesbian in a group where she could otherwise use her skin privilege to

fit in. By speaking out, by revealing her sexual identity, she risked giving up her position of privilege.

Dr. G. continued, "It's a terrible thing to feel invisible, and she [Miriam] is tired of being the one to speak up. I do know that privilege is not attached to being gay. I'm not the only one who is not privileged. Nobody has a corner on pain. If we are not careful, we fall into the divide and conquer mentality of hate. We can't succumb to this." As Beverly Tatum (2003) wrote, "Many of us are both dominant and subordinant…as Audre Lorde said, from her vantage point as a Black lesbian, 'There is no hierarchy of oppression.' The thread and threat of violence runs through all the isms. There is a need to acknowledge each other's pain even as we attend to our own" (p. 27). Indeed, we must not engage in a my-pain-is-worse-than-your-pain contest; we can hold both experiences simultaneously.

Yet, for some students, holding multiple oppressions is difficult. As de Jesus (2004, p. 27) explains, "Students feel that racial oppression is the most important issue societally, and that attention to gender/sexuality "competes" too much with race issues. Furthermore, students seem to grasp the concept of race as social construct, but cannot do the same for gender/sexuality. It's the oppression derby: students contend that homophobia isn't a real issue because it's understood to be a "lifestyle choice," whereas "race cannot be hidden." This is a particularly worrisome stance adopted by heterosexual students of color.

This issue loomed large, yet in the fifteen minutes since Bernice had said, "so you're gay--that's your choice," no one had yet named it. Miriam said, "You called it a choice. That's offensive to me. I didn't choose this. The word choice is very loaded." Indeed, Bernice was doing to Miriam exactly what she had accused Miriam of doing—making assumptions and being offensive without meaning to, and hurting unintentionally.

"I didn't know that," said Bernice.

Two hours had gone by while we helped Miriam and Bernice explore their feelings of hurt and anger, and all four of us were exhausted from the emotional effort. As facilitators, we'd provided support by telling them what was familiar to us about their experiences, and we encouraged the women to explain how both the spoken and unspoken words had affected them. As we stood, the two women moved toward one another and embraced. They agreed to continue the truthful dialogue and to consider the next steps.

FOLLOW-UP

What about the other 20 students in the class who heard the words and felt the hurt and tension? In our facilitation session, Bernice and Miriam had an opportunity to listen to one another and to hear one another, but the other students were still suffering from the limited understanding shaped by their own assumptions and misunderstandings; they lacked awareness of the subtexts involved.

As instructors, we had attempted to create an inclusive learning community, so now we had to face the fact that --despite our best intentions—misunderstanding had prevailed. If students come in the door with assumptions and leave with those same assumptions, the learning situations we created were not sufficiently effective. We needed to do better, for if these emerging teachers didn't "know" about these issues at a deep level, they wouldn't be able to serve as effective facilitators when cross-cultural conflicts arose in their own classrooms, as Gary Howard states in his book by the same title, We can't teach what we don't know. Therefore, even though Bernice and Miriam had come to a point of understanding, there was more work to be done.

Bernice and Miriam agreed to talk with the other classmates at the start of the next semester, to give them a glimpse of the healing journey they'd made together. Miriam and Bernice both

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knew what it felt like to be misunderstood. They both knew what it felt like to make assumptions about another person and to come to realize that these assumptions were erroneous. They both knew that hurt lurked behind their passionate feelings. They both had caused hurt by focusing on making their own positions clear, rather than on trying to understand the other's position. They both had had the intention to "teach" the other about a "foreign" culture. They both had spoken honestly and openly, and so, at the end of May, they could both finally say, "You've opened my eyes. I appreciate you."

In June, the women's truthful dialogue impacted the cohort's discourse in a positive way. In a small group situation, Bernice felt that she was not acknowledged. Then, however, she was pleasantly surprised when Miriam stopped the conversation and said, "Hey, Bernice just said something that we need to listen to." Bernice reported feeling shocked and amazed and pleased that her feelings about being unheard and invisible seemed to have actually been received.

The next September, when the cohort met again, the two women asked the instructor if they could have a little time with the class to discuss what had happened and what they had learned. First, we acknowledged that we had been left with emotion after the conflict. The instructor reviewed what had happened during the class in the spring, and spoke about the follow-up session with Bernice, Miriam, Dr. M., and Dr. G. Then, Dr. G. challenged the students in the cohort to self-reflect--if they thought it would be difficult for them to revisit the conflict, they needed to consider how it is to live it. "Bernice and Miriam heard each other. They traveled a journey together that they never thought they would. It is profoundly valuable and heartfelt for them to share this."

Bernice and Miriam stood together at the front of the class, clearly comfortable with one another. Bernice shared, "I said, 'not to make assumptions.' I realized that I was saying that but I never looked at her perspective. I realized that I made assumptions. I did exactly what I asked you not to do with kids. I came to learn how to respect other people's choices. You haven't lived my life, so you can't see the way I do—the only way to look is from where you are. You need to help me understand you."

Miriam, who had been intently listening to Bernice, then spoke, "I came away seeing assumptions I had made. I thought I had enough understanding and I thought I knew what it was like to be Black in America. I have my own experiences as a member of a marginalized group, but it is nothing like Bernice's experiences."

The group of students who were listening looked uncomfortable, so Dr. G. spoke to them. "Sit with the discomfort rather than try to make it feel better."

During the discussion, for instance, Miriam said, "I never really looked at the fact that Bernice and others live in a White-dominated society. I can hide my gayness if I choose, but Bernice has no choice. That makes me uncomfortable and sad."

"But no one's experience should be minimized," Bernice said. "It's just a different experience. I felt a glimpse of assumptions I'd made. It was a huge assumption and I didn't even know I was making an assumption!"

We all saw that we can move through being hurt, angry, and feeling isolated. If someone feels invisible in a learning community, it is a group issue. "Otherwise, we're a collection of individuals," said Dr. M.

A classmate spoke up and said, "I'm glad we did this. I was left wondering what happened. It's valuable to me and I thank you for sharing."

Another student said, "I felt there was a gash in the group. I didn't know what to do."

Certainly, we had talked in class more than

once about assumptions, but hearing about the resolution of this conflict gave the students in the class a lesson about assumptions they were not likely to forget. They became acutely aware that we learn when we listen to others, when we hear them on their own terms, truly believing that they have their own valid set of experiences.

CONCLUSION

In truthful dialogue, the participants are encouraged to examine themselves--their feelings, their experiences, their hopes and dreams. The facilitator(s) assist them in communicating in a way that feels safe for all involved. Sometimes, this process of speaking our truths is sufficient. Lorde explains this phenomenon: "I have come to believe over and over again that what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood. That the speaking profits me, beyond any other effect" (p. 40). Finally, if appropriate, the facilitators assist in planning for some kind of action, such as our final, whole-group meeting.

These are conversations that engage our heads and our hearts--we speak of our ideas, beliefs, and theoretical understandings of human behavior and we also reveal the deeply personal feelings in our hearts. Inspirational educator Parker Palmer (1998) says, "To educate is to guide students on an inner journey toward more truthful ways of seeing and being in the world" (p. 120). As musicians in this unpredictable and creative jazz ensemble that we call education, we must figure out how to facilitate the outward communication of those inner truths. By encouraging truthful dialogue, we can begin, one conversational improvisation at a time.

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